

Why the U.S. Has a Case of The Mumbles On Lithuania

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WASHINGTON

THE situation in Lithuania has become a test of whether the cold war is really over. The way President Bush and President Mikhail S. Gorbachev handle the explosive questions raised by Lithuania's drive for independence will demonstrate whether they are truly willing to treat one another more as allies than adversaries.

Consider a few of the delicate issues posed by the evolving situation in Lithuania, where the Kremlin has expanded its economic embargo even as officials in Moscow and Vilnius are making conciliatory noises.

• Mr. Gorbachev has already proven to the United States that he is not Stalin. But for Washington to go on expanding relations with him, must he now prove that he is Woodrow Wilson and immediately set Lithuania free?

neigh Mr. Gorbachev lives in a tough ethnic borhood — a teeming multi-ethnic empire bursting with conservative and rabid nationalists. But should it mean the United States things in tolerance his doing nasty under this, he short run, so he will do it in the long run?

• In the long run? tively insis United States never ac- Khrushchev Lithuania, nev of should it not punish Mr. Gorbachev for not doing so on the terms Lithuanians want — particularly when it was precisely his reforms that made the Lithuanian independence movement possible?

Caution and Anger

The Bush Administration initially confronted these questions by urging both sides to enter into a peaceful dialogue. But as events in Lithuania have deteriorated, the Administration, while doing its best to postpone taking any action, has grown privately angry with both parties. While they would not say so publicly, officials believe that the Lithuanians have behaved foolishly by simply declaring their independence in defi-

ance of Moscow without any tactical plan as to how to achieve it. It is not enough for small, weak states to be right; they also have to be smart.

At heart, there is much more sympathy in the Administration for Mr. Gorbachev and his dilemma than there is for the Lithuanians' demand for immediate independence. The democratic reforms Mr. Gorbachev has initiated, and the arms control agreements he is prepared to enter into, could better the lives of millions of Americans and Russians. If, to preserve that process, three million Lithuanians might have to delay independence a few years, then, American officials say privately, so be it.

Making an Example

At the same time, Administration officials are beginning to fear that Mr. Gorbachev may have decided to make such an example of Lithuania — so no other Soviet public would even think about secession — that he will exceed what the White House considers tolerable levels of pressure. If Mr. Gorbachev goes too far — and he will know it when we see it — said one Administration official — the United States will punish him by reducing some trade or commercial ties that benefit him much more than Washington. But the White House, under the guise of consulting with the public, is trying to postpone a moment of reckoning as long as it can. Barring a massacre, the United States does not intend to allow Lithuania to upset arms control negotiations or other mutually advantageous aspects of the relationship.

While this is the policy, one would hardly know it from Administration public statements. On the subject of Lithuania, President Bush and Secretary of State James A. Baker 3d have engaged in the diplomatic equivalent of mumbling. After Mr. Baker last week delivered, in testimony to Congress, the most explicit statement yet by the Administration on its Lithuania policy, Representative J. J. Pickle, Democrat of Texas, remarked to him: "I join with my colleagues in commending you for a

good statement. At the same time, Mr. Secretary, I've tried to read through it hurriedly, and I've listened to you, and I keep asking myself 'Now what did he say?' "

To some extent this mumbling is deliberate. By keeping its red lines vague, the White House hopes to maintain maximum flexibility and maximum deterrence by constantly forcing Mr. Gorbachev to wonder whether the next move will be the one that goes too far. At the same time, the Bush team is also speaking in muted voices because it is afraid of criticism from the Republican right. Or, as Richard N. Perle, a former senior Pentagon official in the Reagan Administration, put it: "Were it not for the Republican right, what we would be seeing in Lithuania today is an unvarnished American sellout rather than a glossed-over one." But to a great extent the Administration's mumbling on Lithuania is part of an oft-repeated pattern — an inability to ar-

Officials are sympathetic to Gorbachev. But where are the limits?

ticulate its foreign policy so that the average American can understand and identify with it.

The situation in Lithuania is a wake-up call saying that change in the Soviet Union is going to be a long, bumpy, nasty, occasionally violent process that will not be supervised by Mother Teresa. At every bump in the road the Administration is going to find its policies toward the Soviet Union challenged by voices from the right, left and center. Mr. Bush and

Mr. Baker seem to believe that by saying little they will maximize their room to maneuver. But perhaps only by stating frankly the competing considerations in Lithuania will the Administration build the confidence with the public and Congress that allows real maneuverability.

Michael J. Sandel, a Harvard University political theorist, said: "I don't see why they can't say in simple language: 'Frankly, we are confronted here with a dilemma between our commitment to the principle of national self-determination on one hand and our fervent desire that Gorbachev succeed in bringing political and economic reform to the Soviet Union as a whole on the other. Therefore our interests in his political survival and success have to temper, but not extinguish, our support for Lithuanian independence.' "

By not clearly articulating the competing principles at stake and acknowledging the tension between them, said Mr. Sandel, the Adminis-

tration fails to do justice to either and runs the risk that both principles will eventually become blurred or distorted in the public's mind.

Such are the challenges posed by Lithuania. Mr. Bush's and Mr. Gorbachev's ability to meet them in creative ways, argued Michael Mandelbaum, an expert on East-West relations at the Council on Foreign Relations, will determine whether Lithuania "is the latest cold war crisis or the first post-cold war crisis." He added, "If it is just another cold war crisis, then what Gorbachev has done would demand harsh condemnation and a halt to real progress in the relationship."

If it is a post-cold war crisis, he said, "then it is just a bump in a road in which the United States gives Gorbachev some leeway and Gorbachev eventually strikes a deal with Lithuania that allows him to save face, but gives the Lithuanians the promise of fulfilling all or most of their aspirations in the long run."